



Office of Disease  
Prevention and Health  
Promotion

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## Health Literacy Fact Sheet for HHS Employees

**What is health literacy?** The national *Healthy People 2010* objective defines health literacy as “The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions” (see *Healthy People 2010; IOM Report*). Health literacy encompasses two dimensions: communication capacities, currently measured in terms of literacy skills, and knowledge of various health topics.

**Why is health literacy important?** Low literacy has been linked to adverse health outcomes such as less understanding and use of preventive services and higher rates of hospitalization (see *IOM Report; AHRQ Report*). According to the Institute of Medicine, the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey findings indicate approximately 90 million adults may lack the needed literacy skills to effectively use the U.S. health system.

**Which populations are at risk?** Populations most likely to experience low-literacy levels are older adults, racial and ethnic minorities, people with low education levels, people with low income levels, non-native speakers of English, and people with compromised health status (see *IOM Report; AHRQ Report*).

**Who is responsible for improving health literacy?** The primary responsibility for addressing health literacy lies with healthcare providers, public health professionals, and healthcare and public health systems (see *IOM Report; Healthy People 2010 Health Literacy Action Plan*). Healthcare and public health systems are complex bureaucracies that are challenging to navigate. Part of our job as HHS employees is to protect the health of all Americans, especially those who are least able to help themselves. Therefore, we must ensure that health information materials, including informed consent forms, do not include jargon and technical language that make them unnecessarily difficult to use.

### How is HHS addressing health literacy?

- Secretary’s Workgroup on Health Literacy as part of the HHS Prevention Initiative (see *Prevention: A Blueprint for Action*).
- HHS Health Literacy Workgroup with HHS agency liaisons.
- NIH/AHRQ Understanding and Promoting Health Literacy Program Announcement: <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/pa-files/PA-04-117.html>.
- Health Literacy leadership by Surgeon General Carmona:  
“Health literacy is the currency of success for everything I am doing as the Surgeon General.”

—Speech to AMA House of Delegates, June 2003

## What can HHS employees do to address health literacy?

- Provide incentives for recipients of publicly funded grants, contracts, cooperative agreements, and program funds to demonstrate how they address the health literacy needs of populations studied or served.
- Promote additional research, including formative research, and program funding to address health literacy needs.
- Promote the development and distribution of materials that have been evaluated for comprehension with their intended users.
- Support the development of an evidence-based approach to training a broad spectrum of healthcare and public health professionals to communicate effectively with different consumer and patient groups, including those with limited literacy.
- Contact your agency's Health Literacy Coordinator (see attached list).

## Where can I find more information on health literacy?

- AHRQ Report—*Literacy and Health Outcomes* (2004): <http://www.ahrq.gov/clinic/epcsu/s/litsum.htm>
- *Healthy People 2010 Health Literacy Action Plan—Communicating Health: Priorities and Strategies for Progress* (2003): <http://odphp.osophs.dhhs.gov/projects/healthcomm>
- *Healthy People 2010* (2000): <http://www.healthypeople.gov/>
- HRSA Health Literacy Web page: <http://www.hrsa.gov/quality/healthlit.htm>
- IOM Report—*Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion* (2004): <http://www.iom.edu/report.asp?id=19723>
- NIDCD Improving Health Literacy Web page: [http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/education/news/improving\\_health\\_literacy.asp](http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/education/news/improving_health_literacy.asp)
- NLM Bibliography—*Understanding Health Literacy and its Barriers* (2004): <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/pubs/cbm/healthliteracybarriers.html>
- *Prevention: A Blueprint for Action* (2004): <http://aspe.hhs.gov/health/blueprint/>



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